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## HOW OUR ANCESTORS WERE CURED

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SUPPOSE you had a bad case of rheumatism, and your physician came to your bedside and exclaimed loudly, "*Hocus pocus, toutus talonteus, vade celeriter jubeo!* You are cured." What would you think, what would you do, and what fee would you pay him? Probably, in spite of your aches and pangs, you would make astonishing speed—for a rheumatic person—in proffering him the entire room to himself. But there was a time—and that as late as Shakespeare's day—when so-called doctors in rural England used just such words not only for rheumatism, but for many another disease. And to this hour the fakir on the street corner uses that opening expression, "*Hocus pocus.*" Those words simply prove how slowly the Christian religion was absorbed by ancient Anglo-Saxon paganism; for "*Hocus pocus*" is but the hastily mumbled syllables of the Catholic priest to his early English congregation—"Hoc est corpus," "this is the body"; and the whole expression used by the old-time doctor meant merely that in the name of the body of Christ he commanded the disease to depart quickly.

How superstitions and ancient rites do persist. To this hour the mountaineers of southwestern Virginia and eastern Tennessee believe that an iron ring on the third finger of the left hand will drive away rheumatism, and to my personal knowledge one fairly intelligent Virginian believed this so devoutly that he actually never suffered with rheumatic pains unless he took off the iron ring he had worn for fifteen years. It is an old, old idea—this faith in the ring-finger. The Egyptians believed that a nerve led straight from it to the heart; the Greeks and Romans held that a blood-vessel called the "vein of love" connected it closely with that organ; and the medieval alchemists always stirred their dangerous mixtures with that finger because, in their belief, it would most quickly indicate the presence of poison. So, too, many an ancient declared that whenever the ring-finger of a sufferer became numb, death was near at hand. Thus in twentieth century civilization we hear echoes of the life that Rameses knew when the Pyramids were building.

Our Anglo-Saxon forefathers had great faith in mysterious words. The less they understood these the more they believed in the curative power. Thus the name of foreign idols and gods brought terror to the local demons that enter one's body, and when Christianity first

entered England, and its meanings were but dimly understood, the names of saints, apostles and even the Latin and Greek forms of "God" and "Jesus" were enemies to all germs. Then, too, what comfort a jumbling of many languages brought to the patient, especially if the polyglot cure were expressed in rhythmic lines. Here, for instance, in at least five languages, is a twelfth century cure for gout:

Meu, treu, mor, phor,  
Teux, za, zor,  
Phe, lou, chri  
Ge, ze, on.

Perhaps to our forefathers suffering from over-indulgence in the good things of this world, this wondrous group of sounds brought more comfort than the nauseous drugs of the modern practitioner. Any mysterious figure or letter was exceedingly helpful in the sick room of a thousand years ago. The Greek letters "Alpha" and "Omega" had reached England almost as soon as Christianity had, and the old-time doctor triumphantly used them in his pow-wows. Geometric figures in a handful of sand or seeds would prophesy the fate of the ill—and do we not to this day tell our fortune in the geometric figures made by the dregs in our tea-cups? Paternosters, snatches of Latin hymns, bits of early Church ritual were used by quacks of the olden days for much the same reason as the geometric figures—because they were unusual and little understood.

It would have been well had our Anglo-Saxon forefathers confined their healing practises to such gentle homeopathic methods as those mentioned above; but instead desperate remedies were sometimes administered by the determined medicine-man. Diseases were supposed to be caused mainly by demons—probably the ancestors of our present germs—and the physician of Saxon days used all the power of flattery and threat to induce the little monsters to come forth. When the cattle became ill, for instance, the old-time veterinarian shrieked, "Fever, depart; 917,000 angels will pursue you!" If the obstinate cow refused to be cured by such a mild threat, the demons were sometimes whipped out of her, and, if this failed to restore her health, a hole was pierced in her left ear, and her back was struck with a heavy stick until the evil one was compelled to flee through the hole in her ear. Nor was such treatment confined to cattle. The muscular doctors of a thousand years ago claimed they could cure insanity by laying it on lustily with a porpoise-skin whip, or by putting the maniac in a closed room and smoking out the pestering fiends. One did well to retain one's sanity in those good old days.

This use of violent words or deeds in the cure of disease is as ancient almost as the race of man. The early Germans attempted to relieve sprains by reciting confidently how Baldur's horse had been cured by

Woden after all the other mighty inhabitants of Valhalla had given up the task, and even earlier tribes of Europe and Asia had used for illness such a formula as: "The great mill stone that is India's is the bruiser of every worm. With that I mash together the worms as grain with a mill stone." Long after Christianity had reached the Anglo-Saxons of England, the sick often hung around their necks an image of Thor's hammer to frighten away the demon germs that sought to destroy the body. This appeal to a superior being was common to all Indo-European races, and the early Christian missionaries wisely did not attempt to stamp out a belief of such antiquity, but merely substituted the names of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints for those of the heathen deities. And even into the nineteenth century this ancient form of faith cure persisted; for there are living yet in Cornwall people who heard, as children, this charm for tooth-ache:

Christ passed by his brother's door,  
Saw his brother lying on the floor;  
What aileth thee, brother?  
Pain in the teeth.  
Thy teeth shall pain thee no more,  
In the name of the Father, Son and  
Holy Ghost, I command the pain to be gone.

Let us no longer boast of the carefulness of the modern physician; the ceremonies and directions of the Anglo-Saxon doctor were just as painstaking in minuteness and accuracy. When you feel the evil spirits entering you, immediately seek shelter under a linden tree; for out of linden wood were not battle-shields made? Long before Christianity had brought its gentler touches to English life the tribal medicine man wildly brandished such a shield, and sang defiantly to the witch maidens or disease demons:

Loud were they, lo! loud, as over the land they rode;  
Fierce of heart were they, as over the hill they rode;  
Shield thee now thyself, from their spite thou  
may'st escape thee.  
Out, little spear, if herein thou be!  
Underneath the linden stand I, underneath the  
shining shield,  
For the might maidens have mustered up their strength,  
And have sent their spear screaming through the air!  
Back again to them will I send another,  
Arrow forth a-flying from the front against them!  
Out, little spear, if herein thou be!

This business of singing was very necessary in the old time doctor's practise. Sometimes he chanted into the patient's left ear, sometimes into his mouth, and sometimes on some particular finger, and the patient evidently had to get well or die to escape the persistent concerts

of his physician. Not infrequently, too, the doctor placed a cross upon the part of one's anatomy to which he was giving the concert, and often the effect was increased by putting other crosses upon the four sides of the house, the fetters and bridles of the patient's horse, and even on the foot prints of the man, or the hoof prints of the beast. Faith in the cross as a charm was unwavering; "the cross of Christ has been hidden and is found," declared the Saxon soothsayer, and by the same token the lost cattle will soon be discovered.

Many and marvelous were the methods to be followed scrupulously by the sick. Cure the stomachache by catching a beetle in both hands and throwing it over the left shoulder with both hands without looking backward. Have you intestinal trouble? Eat mulberries picked with the thumb and ring finger of your left hand. Do you grow old before your time? Drink water drawn silently *down stream* from a brook before daylight. Beware of drawing it upstream; your days will be brief. It reminds one of the practise of the modern herb doctor in peeling the bark of slippery elm *down* if you desire your cold to come down out of your head, or peeling it *up* if you desire the cold to come up out of your chest. One not desiring to place his trust in roots and barks and herbs might turn for aid to the odd numbers, and by reciting an incantation three or seven or nine times might not only regain health, but recover his lost possessions. Or the sufferer might transfer his disease by pressing a bird or small animal to the diseased part and hastily driving the creature away. The ever-willing and convenient family dog might be brought into service on such an occasion by being fed a cake made of barley meal and the sick man's saliva, or by being fastened with a string to a mandrake root, which, when thus pulled from the ground, tore the demon out of the patient.

The cure of children was a comparatively easy task for the Anglo-Saxon doctor; for the only thing to be done was to have the youngster crawl through a hole in a tree, the rim of the hole thus kindly taking to itself all the germs or demons. So, too, minor sores, warts and other blemishes might easily be effaced by stealing some meat, rubbing the spot with it, and burying the meat; as the meat decayed the blemish disappeared. So to this day some Indians, and not a few Mexicans make a waxen image of the diseased part, and place it before the fire to melt as a symbol of the gradual waning of the illness. So, too, the ancient Celts are said to have destroyed the life of an enemy by allowing his waxen image to melt before the fire.

To cure a dangerous disease or the illness of a full-grown man was, however, a much more difficult matter. Inflammation, for instance, was the work of a stubborn demon, and stubborn, therefore, must be the strife with him. Hence, dig around a sorrel plant, sing three paternosters, pull up the plant, sing "*Sed libera nos a malo*," pound

five slices of the plant with seven pepper corns, chant the psalm "Misere mei, Deus" twelve times, sing "Gloria in excelsis, Deo," recite another paternoster, at daybreak add wine to the plant and pepper corns, face the east at mid-morning, make the sign of the cross, turn from the east to the south to the west, and then drink the mixture. Doubtless by this time the patient had forgotten that he ever possessed inflammation.

Long did the superstitions in medicine persist. In Chaucer's day, the fourteenth century, violent and poisonous drugs were used, but luckily they were often administered to a little dummy which the doctor carried about with him. As we read each day in our newspapers of the various nostrums advertised as curing every mortal ill, we may well wonder if the average credulity has really greatly lessened after twelve centuries of fakes and faith cures, and we almost long for the return of the day when the medicine man practised on a dummy instead of the human body.